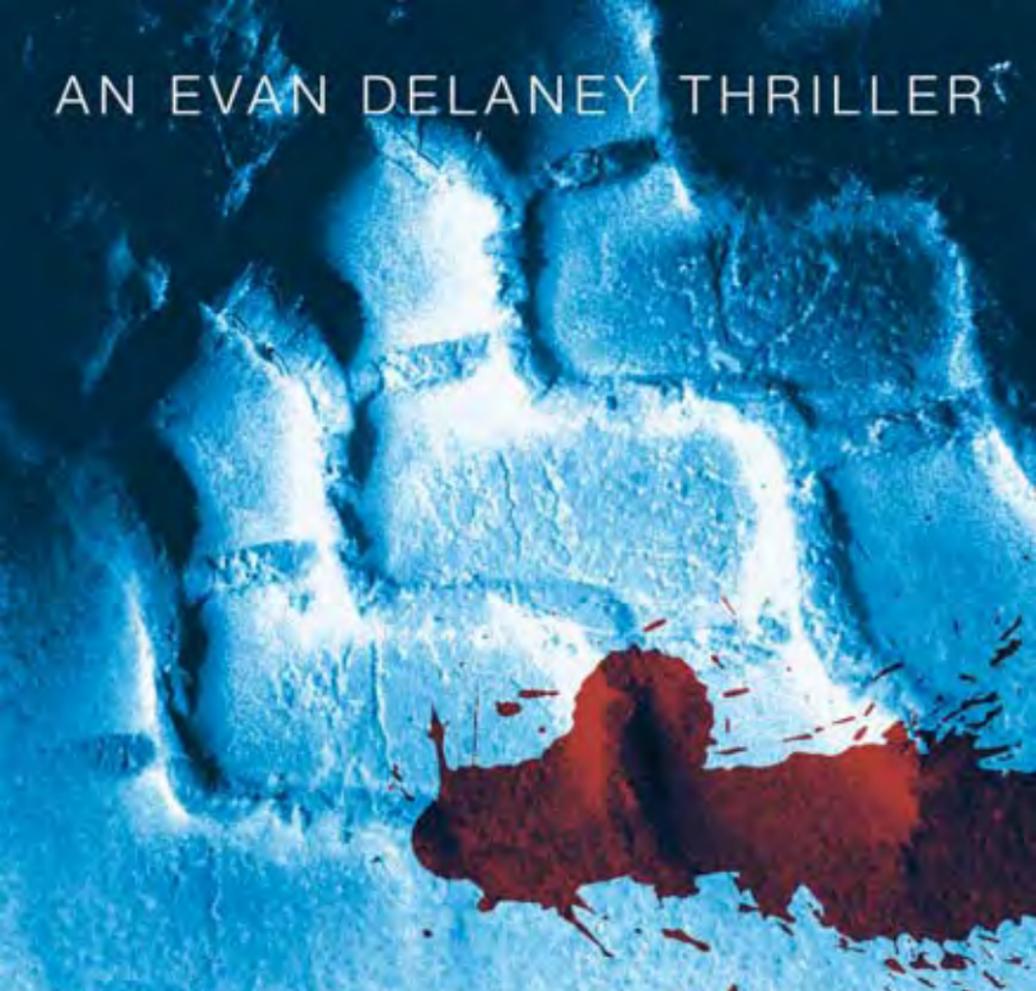


AN EVAN DELANEY THRILLER



**MEG
GARDINER**

HIT. RUN. DIE.

MISSION CANYON

One

People ask me whose fault it was. Who caused the accident? Where did the blame lie – on reckless driving, blinding sunlight, a sharp curve in the road? Hidden in their questions is a deeper query. Did Jesse bring it on himself? Was he careless? Perhaps he rode his bike into the middle of the road. Perhaps he insulted God. Maybe that's why he won't be walking me down the aisle, they imply.

What people want to hear, I think, is that the accident was fate, or foolishness. The hit-and-run killed Isaac Sandoval outright. It left Jesse Blackburn paralyzed and broken on the hillside, struggling to reach his friend's body. And people want me to tell them *yes*, it was the victims' fault. Jesse should have done something different, should have looked over his shoulder or flossed his teeth every day. What they want me to tell them is *no*, of course it could never happen to you. They want reassurance, and I can't give it to them.

When they asked me whose fault it was, I always said: the driver's. It was the fault of the man who sat behind the wheel of a satin-gray BMW, arcing up a narrow road into the foothills of Santa Barbara, with one hand on the steering wheel and the other caressing the hair of the woman whose head bobbed above his lap. It was the fault of the man getting the blow job. It was the fault of the guy who got away.

That's what I always told people. Until now.

'There's going to be security,' Jesse said.

'Don't worry, I can handle it.'

Jesse stared out the window of the car at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art across the street. Sunset was painting the white building orange. Guests were arriving, and their costumes glittered as they climbed the steps to the entrance. Jesse drummed his hands on the steering wheel.

'You can't hesitate,' he said. 'Straight in, do it, get out. If there's any trouble—'

I put my hand on his. 'I know how to crash a party.'

He gave me a glance – blue eyes cool, mouth askew, the patented Blackburn Wry Look. 'Evan, this isn't a Brownie sing-along.'

'Trust me. It's an art museum. The guards care about keeping the paintings inside, not about keeping people out.'

'Don't count on that,' he said. 'And your wig's crooked.'

I straightened it. 'You just want to do this yourself. You'd love to stick it to Cal Diamond with all his colleagues looking on.'

'Absolutely.'

But we both knew that Diamond would spot Jesse coming a mile away, even though he had on faded jeans and an old USA Swimming T-shirt, and didn't look like a lawyer. With his youth and good looks, the brown hair he hadn't cut in months, and his hardware, Diamond couldn't miss him. So the job was mine.

I struck a pose. 'How do I look?'

He gazed at my costume: frosted white lipstick, hoop earrings as big as grapefruit, the black wig rising on my head like a hair volcano. The sequined pink mini-dress came from a vintage clothing store, the white vinyl boots from my closet, relics of a year misspent on the high school drill team.

'Perfect,' he said. 'Very I-Dream-of-Jeannie.'

'It's supposed to be Diana Ross.'

He eyed my Irish complexion skeptically.

'Fine. Diana O'Ross,' I said.

He handed me the summons and complaint, and held up a snapshot. It showed a man in his fifties, bald with unruly eyebrows and snappish teeth.

I said, 'He even looks like a swindler.'

'Yeah, and I hear that tonight he'll look like Zorro. So watch out for his whip.' He flicked his finger against the snapshot. 'And for his wife.'

The photo showed Mari Vasquez Diamond standing next to her husband, looking much younger than him, all sinewy bronze limbs and long fingers curled around his arm. She had set her dogs loose on the last process server who approached their door.

'Her Dobermans won't be here tonight,' I said, getting out of the car. 'I'll serve him, Jesse.'

I crossed the street. The lights of the city were coming on, a glittering spray below the green folds of the mountains. The sky was streaked with jet contrails flushing pink in the summer sunset. Ahead, guests were going into the museum. Bogart, Cleopatra, the Pope.

Sashay, I told myself. Act as if you have an invitation to this benefit. Attitude is everything.

Cal Diamond was all attitude. He acted the business wizard, and investors shoveled money into his software company, Diamond Mindworks. He cooked the books, plundered the company pension plan, and built himself a Spanish-style hacienda fit for a conquistador. But Diamond's life was about to come tumbling down, because his investors had hired Jesse's law firm to sue him for fraud.

The problem was, Diamond had been evading service for weeks. Jesse was getting pissed off. And when he got pissed off, he got ruthless.

It was one of the things I loved about him.

He knew that Diamond wouldn't miss this charity fundraiser – his company was one of the high tech firms sponsoring it. This was our best chance to hit him with the summons.

I climbed the steps toward the museum entrance. A woman with a clipboard stood at the door, checking names against the guest list. She wore tiny square eyeglasses and brown lipstick. When I approached, she assumed a knowing expression and pointed at me with her pen.

'Let's see. Jackie Kennedy?'

'Score half a point for the correct decade. Who's in charge here?'

Her pen hovered in the air.

'Yoo hoo,' I said. 'Do you work for this museum?'

Her mouth puckered. 'Certainly.'

'Well, you're about two minutes from disaster.' I pointed over my shoulder. 'One of your guests is circling the block looking for a parking spot. He's dressed as the Lone Ranger, and he's hauling a horse trailer.'

'You can't be—'

'Serious? Do you want to wait until he rides through the door into the Greek Antiquities, shouting, "Hi Ho, Silver?"'

She blinked, looking up the street, and said, 'Wait here.'

She scurried down the steps. I walked inside.

Two minutes: I figured that was all I had before she came after me. I breezed into the foyer, past a string quartet, and into a central gallery. Above the skylight a Gauguin sky unrolled, dense blue. People stood in clots, drinking and preening. It was a tech crowd, here to raise money for science and engineering scholarships. Most were baby boomers costumed in polyester and nostalgia. I saw Sonny and Cher, and Darth Vader. But I didn't see Zorro.

I worked my way around the gallery. Talk caromed off the walls. In my head I heard my dad's voice. *Thousands dollars for law school and you're serving a summons yourself?* A waiter handed me a glass of Chablis. *You hated practicing, but love the dirty work. What are you thinking?* I pushed through the chiffon-and-Spandex forest.

And ran straight into Cal Diamond's wife. Lady Doberman.

Her ruby necklace spelled out *Mari*, but could have read *trophy bride*. I guessed her to be about forty. She was as thin as a paper cut, wearing a strapless black evening gown and showcase breasts. Wow. What a geometry problem for the nerds in the room – calculate volume and density, accounting for the molecular mass of silicone. Her sable hair was sculpted high on her head. Her long fingers were coiled around a glass of red wine.

She was talking to a sandy-haired man, and I started to veer away, anxious to avoid her. But the man called to me.

'Where ya going, Gidget?'

He was slouching against a pillar, with an insouciance so cool that he must have practiced it before a mirror. His costume was a black

turtleneck, houndstooth jacket, and tight jeans. He eyed me as though I were an hors d'oeuvre.

'Surf's up. Stick around,' he said.

Mari Diamond stood as straight as a scalpel, swirling her wine glass. 'She's not actually going for Gidget.' Chill gaze. 'I hope.'

I nudged past her. What a queen bee. She was ready to sting me, just for diverting a man's attention from her. In my head I now heard Jesse's voice, saying, *Don't, Delaney. Holster your tongue and back away from the bait.*

'After all,' she said, 'Gidget was a teenager. Talk about missing the mark.'

Okay, blow my attitude knob off the control panel, why don't you?

I heard myself say, 'You should know.'

'What?'

I pictured Jesse slapping his hand against his forehead. I told my feet to move. I said, 'You're not exactly prom queen material, yourself.'

She froze. 'You did not just say that.'

'Sure I did. I'm too old to take cheap shots from snotty socialites. Excuse me.'

'Don't you walk away.' She thrust out an arm, blocking my path.

'What's your name?'

'Diana Ross.'

Her nostrils dilated. Her jaw didn't move. 'Who is this woman?'

She looked to her companion for support, but his face was bright with amusement.

'She's our Baby Love.' Smiling at me. 'And I'm Steve McQueen.' He gestured to her. 'This is Maria Callas.'

'Charmed,' I said. 'Will Maria be singing tonight, or just hissing at the guests?'

His laugh was full of appetite. 'Dueling divas. I love it.'

And he did. He wanted some of what I was dishing out to her. He could have worn a sign saying, *spank me.*

But Mari Diamond's fingers were white on her wine glass. 'If you're from Diamond Mindworks, you're out of a job.'

She turned and swished away. Raising her hand, she snapped her fingers, signaling somebody. I saw Clipboard standing at the edge of the crowd, her tiny glasses shining as she scanned the room. Mari Diamond was beckoning to her.

Damn. I dove into the crowd. I was almost out of time.

And I saw, in the center of the gallery, a masked character in a black cape and gaucho hat. He was grinning broadly, looking carefree, indifferent about the people he'd bilked, the elderly investors and hourly-wage workers whose life savings he squandered. I took the summons from my purse.

An older man stepped up to shake his hand. His hair looked like an upturned white scrub brush. If his suit was a costume, he had come as an undertaker.

I knew him. Everybody in the room knew him. He was the big man here, and not just because he was a head taller than most people. He was George Rudenski, the CEO of Mako Technologies, main sponsor of tonight's benefit. But I didn't have time for protocol; I had to butt in on him. Mari Diamond was talking to Clipboard, pointing in my direction. I had to do this, right now.

Steve McQueen grabbed my arm. 'What's your rush? Those guys are old farts. Come talk to me.'

'Another time.' I swung out of his grip.

I approached Zorro. 'Cal? Is that you under that mask?'

Pressing a hand to his chest, he bowed and said, 'Señorita, Zorro never reveals his identity.'

George Rudenski looked at me. I had interviewed him for an article on cyber-security that I wrote for *California Lawyer* magazine, and he was trying to place me. His eyes were penetrating.

'Forgive me. Are you with Mako?' he said.

'No, I'm with the Supremes.'

For all I cared, he could out me as a freelance legal journalist, or itinerant lawyer, or for planning to wear white at my wedding. But he knew my connection to Jesse, and if he mentioned it the game would be up.

He gave me a concentrated stare. 'Evan.'

I was out of time. I raised the summons toward the man in the mask.

'Are you Cal Diamond?'

That's when I heard, near the entrance, a whipcrack. I looked up. Strutting through the door was another Zorro.

Laughter bubbled through the room. The first Zorro set hands on hips, consternated at the sight of his double. I felt sweat breaking out on my forehead.

A woman's voice called out, 'There she is.'

Clipboard was butting through the crowd, with a security guard right behind her. She shook her finger at me.

'You. You're in big trouble.'

Looking back, I see how many of the pieces were present, even then. But they were scattered, camouflaged, like leaves swirling across the ground on the wind, and at the time I didn't know what I was seeing. It was the last moment before events started assembling themselves into the nightmare.

Near the entrance, a man let out a shout. The security guard raised a finger to his earpiece, listened, and started running toward the door.

Clipboard watched him go, confused. Or maybe wondering if the Lone Ranger really had shown up. She shot me a suspicious look.

A second guard ran through the crowd. My cellular phone rang, and stopped, and that sent a tickle up my neck. I turned to leave.

George Rudenski put his hand on my arm. 'Why are you looking for Cal?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Are you here to ambush him?' His calm eyes now had heat in them. 'Tonight is about raising money for disadvantaged kids, not about getting yourself a scoop.'

He had it wrong, but just about right. Turning from him, I ducked toward the door before Clipboard could stop me. I felt small.

Outside, I found tumult. Two cars had tangled in front of the museum. A white minivan was up on the sidewalk, and a blue Audi had sideswiped a mailbox.

The guards were running toward it. It was Jesse's car.

I rushed down the stairs, fighting fear. The minivan driver was walking toward the Audi, waving his arms.

'You call that driving?' he shouted. 'You pulled out right in front of me.'

A security guard reached the Audi and yanked open the driver's door.

'Get out of the car.'

Leaning in, he grabbed Jesse's arm. I wanted to slap him.

Jesse wrenched loose. He was talking on his cellphone, had the earpiece in, hands free.

'—South on State Street,' he said. 'Right now, as we speak. Five eleven, brown hair, blue dress shirt and khakis.'

The guard reached for him again.

'Don't touch me.' He elbowed the guard, and locked an arm over the steering wheel so the man couldn't pull him out. Into the phone he said, 'Yes, on foot.'

I breathed. He was okay, I saw. And he was talking to the police, but not about this fender-bender.

I said, 'What's going on?'

The minivan driver turned on me. 'You know this guy? Where'd he learn to drive, clown college?'

Jesse looked up. His eyes were fiery.

He said, 'Brand's here.'

His voice was like a falling blade. The guards, the minivan driver, the shouts and jostling elbows, faded to static. My palms tingled.

'Where?' I said.

He pointed toward the corner. 'Headed down State Street. Hurry.'

He didn't need to say anything else. I ran.

I sprinted down State Street. People were thick on the sidewalk, their

faces cheery in the sunset, backed by palm trees and music tumbling from clubs and restaurants. I weaved and dodged, holding onto my wig, looking frantically around.

Five-foot-eleven, brown hair, blue dress shirt and khakis. That described dozens of men on the street. It didn't begin to cover Brand.

Franklin Brand was the man who drove his two-ton, 325 horsepower car into Jesse and Isaac Sandoval. He was the coward who left them ruined on the ground. He was the fugitive who fled Santa Barbara the night of the crash, the bastard who'd spent three years enjoying himself on a foreign shore while Isaac lay cold in the dirt and Jesse fought to reconstruct his life. He was wanted on a felony warrant for vehicular manslaughter, and he was here, now, somewhere among the throng.

A woman stepped into my path. I banged into her, called out, 'Sorry,' and kept going.

Franklin Brand was the executive who, on an evening like this one, took his company car for a joyride up Mission Canyon. Rounding a curve, he came up behind Isaac and Jesse. They were powering up the hill on their bikes, training for a triathlon. Brand didn't see them until it was too late. The skid marks only started after the point of impact, when he braked to keep from plunging over the edge himself.

At the corner a red light stopped me. Cars streamed past. I looked up and down the cross street. Traffic eased and I ran across the intersection, knocking into people, muttering excuse me.

The day after the crash, an anonymous caller phoned the police and identified Franklin Brand as the driver. The police asked the caller how she knew it was Brand at the wheel. Her answer, recorded verbatim in the police report, was succinct.

'Because I was with him. I had his cock in my mouth at the time.'

She told the cops where to find Brand's car, abandoned and burned in the hills behind the city. But Brand had a passport and he had money offshore, plenty of it. Millions. By the time a judge issued an arrest warrant, he was in Mexico City. The trail died there.

What in hell he was doing here, tonight, in downtown Santa Barbara, I didn't know. But I could not let him get away.

Down the street, I saw a blue shirt swinging through the crowd. My breath caught. His hair was brown and he had on khakis, was the right height. I closed on him.

I remembered seeing Brand's photo in the paper after the accident: pasty skin and budding jowls, a bored look. Ahead, the blue shirt turned, and I caught a glimpse of the man's face, stained red by a neon sign. I slowed, squinting at him.

A feeling like icy water dripped through me. The eyes, the cast of the mouth. It was him.

I hesitated. Should I perform a citizen's arrest? Yell, *Stop, in the name of love?* He picked up his pace.

Call the police, that's what you do. I dug in my purse for my cellphone.

Two college students stumbled out of a Mexican restaurant, singing drunkenly. They lumbered into me and knocked the phone from my hand.

'Oh, man,' said one, staggering. 'Dude, look what you did.'

I bent down, grabbing the phone before they accidentally kicked it. Standing back up, I looked around. Where was Brand?

Ten feet ahead – there, blue shirt standing at the curb. He raised his arm and, with that universal urban gesture, hailed a taxi. A yellow cab swung to a stop. I couldn't believe it. In Santa Barbara, taxis come along as often as Santa's sleigh.

He was grasping the door handle when I dove on him.

I hit him from behind, hard enough to knock his feet off the curb. We bounced off the taxi and tumbled to the sidewalk. My wig fell over my eyes. I heard his breath blow out, felt my knee hit the concrete, heard the sequins on my dress clicking as I scrambled on top of him.

He squirmed underneath me.

I yelled, 'Call the cops.'

I pushed the wig out of my eyes. Beneath me the man stared back.

His hands were up, gesturing surrender. 'Take it – take the damn cab. I'll get another one.'

He was at least fifty-five, with a pencil mustache and aristocratic Latin looks. His wig was just as crooked as mine. It wasn't Brand, not by a mile.

Mortified, I climbed off him, apologizing, helping him up. He fumbled with his toupee. I brushed dust from his shirt.

'I'm sorry,' I said for the fifteenth time.

He waved me off. 'Go away.'

Teeth clenched, I started down the street again. My knee was bleeding. I limped along, looking at the crowd, trying to ignore their stares.

After ten minutes, I stopped. I had lost him.